Scottish teachers to strike over derisory pay offer

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Teachers in Scotland are to stage a 24-hour walkout on November 24. The initial strike day will be taken by Scotland's largest teaching union, the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS).

Tens of thousands of teachers are striking after rejecting a 5 percent pay increase, calling for 10 percent. There was overwhelming support for action in the ballot, with 96 percent saying yes to a strike, on an overall turnout of 71 percent of the membership.

This is the first day of national strike action by the EIS over pay for almost 40 years. The last action on teacher pay was part of a long-running programme of industrial action in the 1980s.

The EIS and the Scottish Secondary Teachers' Association (SSTA) were involved in a pay dispute which lasted for two years against the Conservative government of the time. National strikes took place alongside a rolling programme of action targeted at secondary schools in the constituencies of government ministers.

EIS members at some schools went on strike regularly on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays which ended in 1987 with a Teachers' Pay and Conditions Act. No action on this scale would be considered today by the union bureaucracy.

The EIS represents eight out of 10 Scottish teachers and is the first of the teacher unions to take industrial action. The dispute emerged after a number of paltry pay offers from the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) and the Scottish National Party (SNP) government.

The union rejected a 2.2 percent pay offer in June, with the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers submitting a 10 percent pay claim on behalf of the profession. A revised 3.5 percent pay offer was seen as an insult by teachers. The government then offered a 5 percent pay rise, which was overwhelmingly rejected by union members, with 94 percent opting to refuse the deal.

On November 22, COSLA made a fresh proposal for rises of up to 6.85 percent, but only for teachers new to the profession, on a sliding scale, with experienced teachers still receiving just 5 percent. All these offers represent a substantial real-terms pay cut, well below inflation now at 14.2 percent RPI.

The EIS said that members "have had enough of waiting" for an acceptable offer, with General Secretary Andrea Bradley complaining of "months of unjustifiable dither and delay" from the two bodies, leading teachers to become "increasingly angry over their treatment by their employers".

In truth the "dither and delay" has come from the EIS and other unions stringing along their own members with negotiations when no serious offer was being made.

Bradley stated that teachers "are again being offered a deep real-terms pay cut by their employers," and "as essential public sector workers" are expected "to bear the brunt" of austerity.

The union bureaucracy has overseen this situation over many years. Teachers having not received any pay increase has led to educators struggling to meet the cost of food, fuel, energy and housing. Some are now using food banks.

John Swinney, finance secretary in the Scottish National Party devolved government, announced £615 million of spending cuts in his emergency budget review earlier this month. It followed £560 million cuts to public services in September. SNP education secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville told the Scottish parliament the 10 percent pay demand was "unaffordable" in this context, adding cynically that the cost-of-living crisis is "the priority".

EIS members could be joined later by members of the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland (AHDS) and the SSTA in taking strike action. AHDS members voted by 92 percent to reject the current 5 percent pay offer and 80 percent are willing to take strike

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action. SSTA members have voted by 90 percent to strike with a ballot turnout of 62 percent with the union leadership considering action in the week beginning December 5. The NASUWT teaching union is also balloting its members, closing on November 21.

Educators are clear they want to fight, but even with this significant mandate the unions are trying to reduce the impact by not taking coordinated strike action. This also plays workers off against each other, as one union going out puts pressure on other educators.

The EIS did everything in its power to avert Thursday's strike. Bradley said the union was "hopeful" of a new offer and was prepared to bury the action in talks. "We are ready to consider a new offer as soon as it comes to us," she said.

With the government refusing any concessions, Bradley said on Wednesday, 'The EIS has announced two days of strike action in January and it is now inevitable that further days will be announced tomorrow [Thursday], so we will looking at strikes throughout the months of January and February..." If the government intervened with an offer the EIS could sell to their membership all action could be prevented, so "it really depends what happens at the negotiating table as to whether they can be averted," she pleaded.

Educators should draw the lessons of the unions' role in allowing teachers' pay to stagnate over decades. There is no basis for confidence in their ability to achieve what workers are fighting for and every reason to expect as sellout.

To reverse years of falling wages, slashed school budgets, impossible working conditions and staff shortages, education workers must take matters into their own hands. A network of rank-and-file committees must be established, capable of acting independently of the union bureaucracy which sabotages every fightback. Those who want to take up this struggle should contact and join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee.

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